



Aaron Maté: The U.S. Was Obsessed With Overthrowing Assad

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Glenn Greenwald (GG): Let me ask you about – just a couple more questions – the US objective here. Because obviously the US objective is not to rid the region of tyrants and autocrats and brutal dictators because some of our best friends in that region that we have installed and prop up are characterised by all the things that you just said: a lack of dissent, being tortured, if you criticise the government, that's certainly true in Egypt, it's true in the United Arab Emirates, it's true in even places like Jordan and Kuwait, it's certainly true in Saudi Arabia. And we love those governments, we support those governments, we want those kinds of governments to exist. So that's obviously not the motive, even though we say it is, to free the Syrian people, to eliminate and vanquish dictatorship. What then is the reason why so many people in the United States government over several administrations were so devoted to this goal of removing Assad? Why was that important to the US?

Aaron Maté (AM): Well, as far as I know, I mean this dates back decades, long before Bashar al-Assad took power, it goes back to when his father Hafez al-Assad was in power, and the reason is clear, I mean this was an Arab nationalist government that was always hostile to Israel. Israel stole the Golan Heights from Syria and Syria has always provided at least rhetorical support and some material support, although it's been inconsistent to Palestinian resistance. And so there's been this obsession with taking out the acts of resistance, of which Syria is a member, and that's why if you look at the WikiLeaks emails from Hillary Clinton and other people, they talk about how overthrowing Assad would be so great for Israel. The US and Israel rule the Middle East by force, by having a monopoly on violence, and so their obsession with Hezbollah and Syria and Iran comes down to taking out a deterrent to their aggression. I think that's ultimately what it comes down to. One point about the scenes from Syria, there is of course jubilation from many Syrians that Assad has gone, a repressive leader, he's part of a dynasty that ruled over them for 50 years, they wanted something new. But what we're not seeing though are the people who are scared for their lives, because just going back to Jolani, when he was leading al-Nusra, they were carrying out massacres in places like Latakia against Alawites. An investigation by Human Rights Watch of one such massacre in 2013 found that forces under Jolani's command, Nusra and other insurgent forces, committed systematic destruction of entire families. People in minority groups in Syria, Christians, Druze, Shia, Alawite, many of them are living in fear. I've heard from some people that I know, and they're not joining these scenes of celebration. They're not joining the scenes. We're already seeing some horrific videos coming out of Syria. Maybe things will, I'm hoping after all this carnage, maybe everyone is just exhausted of war, and maybe Jolani will really realise that it's in his own interest, if not his own ideology, it's in his interest to actually stop the sectarianism that has destroyed Syria for so long. But given how it's gone so far in Syria and also in Iraq and Libya, other "successful" regime change wars, I'm not feeling very optimistic about that.

GG: The Israelis have achieved a lot of their long-time goals in about three days since all of this happened, including making incursions into other parts of the Golan Heights and even parts of what the Western media generally calls the buffer zone, meaning Syrian territory, which they have now seized, planted Israeli flags in, promised that they intend to keep that indefinitely. What do you think is the Israeli view of what's taking place in Syria? Because I

think instinctively, there's a lot of things going on. I think instinctively people might say: Well, the Israelis have to at least recognise that it as a risk that if you have Al-Qaeda and ISIS elements and other hardcore Islamic radicals, Sunni Islamic radicals who are governing Syria on the other side of the Israeli border, that that can pose some risk to them. But certainly they've benefited already. What do you think has been the Israeli posture toward these events?

AM: Well, Netanyahu seemed pretty happy about it when he went to the Golan Heights and basically took partial credit for Assad's ouster. He talked about what a great thing this was and how this will further weaken Hezbollah and Iran. So he's pleased. But yeah, at the same time, when you have a group led by the founding leader of Al-Qaeda taking power on your border, you're going to be worried. And also, the problem with Syria is also, even if Jolani is somehow magically reformed as a moderate now, if he's undergone some transformation, which by the way, he's never apologised for the atrocities committed under his watch, so that's now the reason to be sceptical, but let's say he's a reformer now. He's moderate. You still have a lot of groups in Syria that are outside of his control. So there is a lot of danger there. There was an Israeli official who spoke to The New York Times years ago, during the height of the dirty war, who said, for us, like the best case scenario is that they just bleed each other to death. They haemorrhage each other to death. I think that's what Israel wanted the most, is that just you have this constant conflict inside Syria. Everybody destroys themselves. Hezbollah gets bled. Syria gets weakened. So I do think they're happy that Assad is gone, but they now are trying to grapple with what next?! And just to make sure that Syria can never, ever, ever even think about retaking the Golan Heights, Israel's gone on a bombing spree, bombing areas across the country, destroying Syrian military positions, the port of Latakia. They've attacked that. So although I'm sure they're not convinced that Jolani will be their ally, I think they're also pretty happy with how things have turned out so far. And by the way, they were a part of the dirty war. They armed anti-government insurgents on the border and they even treated wounded members of Al-Qaeda and ISIS in their hospitals, which shows you, I think, how they might be feeling right now overall about the ouster of Assad.

GG: Yeah. I mean, I just think it's such a good lesson to be very guarded against anything that we're being convinced of and told about who bad guys are and good guys are, because that can change on a dime so quickly. And, you know, as you say, whatever else is true, the Israelis seem overtly celebrating the events in Syria, however worried they might be.

GG: All right. Last question, Aaron. Donald Trump came out with a statement at which point they weren't quite in Damascus, the anti-government rebels, but they were in the suburbs. They were clearly headed there. It was clear by that point that everything, the fall of Assad was a fait accompli. And Trump basically came out and said: Look, these are not our friends here, neither the government that was deposed nor the people coming in. We don't have any interest in Syria. We need to just stay out and let it all work out. Let them work it out. It's not really our business. What do you make of that statement by Trump?

AM: Well, the part he is missing is his own role. He did try to get out, but when he was undermined by his own generals and subordinates, he caved. He could have insisted on the

US implementing his order to withdraw troops from Syria, but he didn't. As soon as he faced some resistance, he backed down and then he announced that it was theirs to take the oil. So he played a role in this by keeping US troops in Syria to loot Syria's oil. He also played a role by signing into law the Caesar sanctions that have been devastating for Syria, that have made it very hard for ordinary Syrians and prevented reconstruction; as some of the people under Trump openly bragged about. So I think Trump has shown that, you know, he gets the situation in Syria. There's old tweets of his from 2013 and around then where he's saying that the moderate rebels are really ISIS and that the moderate rebels are people who want to fly planes into our buildings. And he's showing that he was aware that we were arming an Al-Qaeda dominated insurgency. And in 2016, I mean, you know this more than anyone that when he campaigned, he talked about how disastrous the wars in Syria and Libya were under the Obama administration. So I agree with his message. I think it's too late. We are in Syria. We do have these sanctions. The damage has been done now. The insurgency we helped arm, the sanctions, the military occupation, that has led to the chaos of today. He does play a small role in it. Although, of course, the primary responsibility on the US side lies with the current occupants of the White House; Antony Blinken, Joe Biden, Jake Sullivan, Samantha Power, all these people who decided back in 2011 that it was a good idea to have a dirty war in Syria, after they had destroyed Libya. So we'll see what Trump does. J .D. Vance has been saying some comments that I think also show that he understands the situation. He made fun of Washington Post columnist, Josh Rogin, saying that the last time this guy was excited about Syria, it got a bunch of Christians killed. And he's right. In Idlib province, which was the stronghold of Jolani and his forces, which Jolani captured in 2015 with the help of the CIA, tacitly, after Jolani took power in Idlib, the Christian population went from about 1200 to three, to three people because Jolani's forces drove them out and also massacred Druze. And J.D. Vance seems to recognise that. So will that reflect a change in policy once Trump takes office? If we're going by the history of the Trump administration, no. Because for all the awareness Trump had, he didn't do much different policy wise. But maybe things now are so bad with a literal Al-Qaeda veteran being the de facto leader of Syria, that will force the Trump administration to rethink things.

GG: And if you talk to a lot of people very close to Trump and the Trump world, as I've done, both off the show, but also on the show, they'll acknowledge that the worst part of the first administration was that there were lots of things that Trump believed in, thought should be done. And he either lacked the discipline and or the competence to prevent these kinds of permanent forces in Washington from sabotaging him. To the point where he ordered troops to leave and generals undermined him and they were celebrated, even though there's few things more dangerous to our democracy than undermining the civilian elected commander in chief by unelected generals. That's a military rule. And, you know, all the people who say they love democracy were cheering them for constantly thwarting Trump. And they swear that this time Trump is aware of that, he's more aware of how things work in Washington, how they've been preparing for at least a year to prevent these sorts of people from worming their way into the administration who want to work against Trump's policies rather than in favour of them. I remain sceptical, given a lot of the people that he's chosen. But to me, that's the number one question that remains to be seen is, you have these instincts that Trump has

that are so clearly right opposed to the bipartisan foreign policy consensus, but you have a lot of people around him who he's still empowering to seem committed to that. And whether they're really going to be loyal to Trump this time, whether he's going to be more attentive and concerned about preventing them, I think that's the big question for Trump, too.

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